

STORM WARNINGS

Volume 7, Issue 4 - February 2019
The Polar Plunge



R. Michael Conley
Founder

"We are heading into a perfect storm and don't see it coming," according to R. Michael Conley, Founder of Weathering the Storm, LLC and this website.

The WTS mission is to "Awaken, engage and help others to weather the storm."

The WTS website provides the following on a regular basis:

Storm Warnings: An in-depth quarterly newsletter.

News Flash: Frequent postings on topical perfect storm issues.

Best Practices: Featuring leaders in sustainability practices.

The Polar Plunge

The ravages of climate change are invading the geopolitical arena and creating what military and intelligence agencies refer to as "threat multipliers," but the term "threat originator" may soon become more applicable, at least in the Arctic. Regardless, using recent Polar events as a case study, our Publisher, Michael Conley, will explore the destabilizing effects of climate change on the geopolitical security of the world.

WTS: For openers, what connections do you see between climate change and the geopolitical well-being of the world, and how would you like to talk about it today?

Conley: The connections are profound, and we can look to the Arctic as an example of the direct role climate change plays in reshaping the geopolitical dynamics of the world. In non-Arctic areas, climate change acts more like a "*threat multiplier*" that can make bad geopolitical situations worse. Against this backdrop, the competition for scarce resources will intensify as the world grows, and there'll be a heavier focus on seabed resources and other oceanic-related issues. I say this with the following assumptions in mind:

- 1) Geopolitical stability is based on security and a nation's ability to meet its basic needs,
- 2) The oceans, at risk, will play a crucial role in meeting these future needs
- 3) Climate change is a destabilizing force that will undermine these efforts,
- 4) The challenge, accordingly, should be framed as one giant systemic challenge.

WTS: Why have you chosen the Arctic region to highlight the geopolitical ramifications of climate change and how it might be a bellwether for flashpoints in other areas?

Conley: The Arctic is a good model because it represents so many of the geopolitical elements now converging as climate change intensifies. Arctic temperatures are increasing at rates far exceeding global averages and offer, accordingly, a peak at how global warming could trigger geopolitical flashpoints elsewhere. Let's just call this Arctic situation the "*Polar Plunge*."

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About the Founder:

Mike Conley is the Founder of Weathering the Storm, LLC and Chairman & CEO of the Conley Family Foundation. As a former Fortune 500 business executive, author, lecturer, and public policy activist, Conley has written and spoken on topics related to the perfect storm. He graduated from the University of Minnesota, after serving in the U.S. Navy, and later completed a post-grad program at Stanford University. He is active on several boards and advisory groups.

The Polar Plunge logic goes something like this: As competition for scarce resources intensifies, and as nations turn increasingly to the oceans for new resources, the rapidly warming Arctic will open new seaways and access to a vast seabed of untapped resources. In doing so, it will call attention to geopolitical issues elsewhere. Among them, maritime laws, jurisdiction over seabed mineral rights, and the interconnections between global warming, melting ice, rising sea levels, and oceanic pollution; all contributors – direct and indirect – to geopolitical destabilization.

WTS: Can you be more specific about the strategic scope and implications of the *Polar Plunge*?

Conley: Global warming is reshaping the Arctic's strategic dynamics, and the three areas of greatest geopolitical interest revolve around national security, new sea routes, and access to untapped resources. The environmental concerns of opening pristine Arctic areas to commercial exploitation are also intensifying, but let's focus for now on the three areas:

National security: Its strategic proximity to the Northern Hemisphere provides a geographical buffer zone for defensive and/or offensive weapons. A natural haven for nuclear submarines and other weapons, it offers a forward base of operations that nations could use to protect – and/or deny to others – access to seaways and scarce resources.

New passageways: The *Northwest* and *Northeast* Passageways offer dramatic shortcuts for shipping goods to and from Europe and Asia, and other areas – cutting distances by as much as 40%. As an alternative to shipping cargo through the Suez and

Panama Canals or other routes, it will be a shipping bonanza. As more summer ice melts, nations will expand their fleets of Arctic-ready ships and icebreaker escorts to keep the sea lanes open even longer.

Natural resources: The U.S. Geological Survey estimated there are about 90 billion barrels of proven undersea oil reserves – equivalent to about 13-years of all oil consumed in the United States – and huge natural gas reserves and other seabed minerals. The Arctic fishing grounds have also been dubbed by some as "*the world's largest storehouse of biological protein.*"

WTS: Okay, we get it: Temperatures are rising, ice is melting, and new opportunities are emerging; what can you say about the jurisdictional components and who has a right to what?

Conley: Here's where it gets interesting because the maritime "rules-of-the-road" that apply in the Arctic also apply elsewhere. There are two things to know about the international law governing

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maritime issues like navigational rights, underwater mineral and resource rights, and coastal water jurisdiction:

First, the generally accepted rules pertaining to these matters are called "*The United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea*." (UNCLOS). Taking effect in 1994, UNCLOS provides a starting point for adjudicating maritime issues. Ironically, the United States, with vast coastal areas to protect, has not formally ratified UNCLOS. Without the same standing as other ratifying nations, we rely on our powerful Navy to provide us a de facto status in the area.

Second, a key provision in UNCLOS, titled "*Exclusive Economic Zones*" – EEZs, for short – outlines the exclusive rights of coastal nations to fisheries, mineral resources, and sea-bed deposits within 200 nautical miles of their coastlines. With so many overlapping EEZ boundaries throughout the world, it's a powder keg. China is embroiled in a number of EEZ disputes in the China Seas, and their new man-made islands that extend their EEZ boundaries out even further – at least in their minds – is currently a hot issue. (See: "*EEZ Flashpoints*") Closer to home, the EEZs of the United States often overlap with Mexico and Cuba as well our proximity to the Arctic via the coastal areas of Alaska.

WTS: Are there any special mechanisms in the Arctic to sort all of this out?

Conley: In addition to UNCLOS and the EEZs, an intergovernmental forum called the *Arctic Council* was formed in 1996 to oversee issues pertaining to nations and indigenous Arctic communities that intersect with the Arctic. The eight nations making up the Council include Canada, Russia, the United States, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, and Denmark – representing Greenland. There are also "Observer" nations – like China – with a strong interest in the Arctic for reasons mentioned.

It's hard to say how this hodge-podge of alignments will play out, but one thing is certain; rising temperatures and rapid ice melts will accelerate strategic Arctic opportunities and intensify the levels of geopolitical contentiousness. Nations will jockey to solidify their positions as efforts to commercialize and militarize their respective Arctic EEZ zones gain traction.

WTS: With growing strategic interests in the Arctic, what are nations like Russia and the United States doing to enhance their geopolitical positions?

Conley: Russian assets in the Arctic Circle dwarf all other nations combined. With access to Polar regions so heavily dependent on icebreakers, Russia, with 40 polar icebreakers and 11 new ones in production, has a commanding lead. Other Russian assets include military bases, deep-water ports, and air bases – all protected by Russia's advanced S-400 surface-to-air missile system.

By comparison, the United States has one – that's right, one – heavy icebreaker, the *Polar Star*, built in 1970, and few other military assets of any consequence in the Arctic. Without a robust fleet of icebreakers and escorts – the key to shipping in the Arctic waterways – we are unable to regularly enter seaways that are readily available to Russian shipping; a loss by default, and a wake-up call to focus more on climate change in our strategic planning process.

WTS: Switching gears, how do the climate-related geopolitical threats in the Arctic compare with climate-induced threats elsewhere, and what can we learn from the *Polar Plunge*?

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Conley: The common denominator, regardless of locale, is the destabilizing impact that climate change has on the world's geopolitical order. The vulnerability of nations to climate change will vary by regions, but it will disproportionately impact poorer nations and populations most exposed to rising sea levels, storms, and the like. While the direct link between climate change and geopolitical stability is easier to identify in the Arctic, the linkages elsewhere pose threats of a different nature; a good many of them ocean-related.

In these areas, climate change is a destabilizing *threat multiplier* that makes bad situations worse. Its insidious grind against living standards, economic well-being, and social order can lead to civil unrest, violence, and an overall threat to home and hearth. It does its damage in opaque ways that conceal the need for a more muscular response. That's part of the problem.

WTS: Can you be more precise about the exact nature of these threats?

Conley: Sure. The record ice melts we're seeing in Greenland, the Arctic, and Antarctica are contributing to rising sea levels. Ocean acidification and coral reef destruction is a threat to sea life and our food sources. Rising temperatures and moister air are changing weather and water patterns and precipitating droughts, floods, wildfires, and catastrophic storms. Food and fresh water sources are compromised by climate change, and public health is most certainly at risk. All are real-time threats to national security and geopolitical stability, yet little is being done.

To be even more specific, the extreme droughts in Africa and the Arab lands were major contributors to the civil unrest that preceded the Arab Spring uprisings and Syrian civil war. The rapid ice melts in the Himalayas will gradually destabilize the fresh water supply of about 25% of the world's population, and coastal surges will displace tens of millions of people in the decades to come. The mass migrations of demoralized people in search of food and fresh water will spark regional wars and become breeding grounds for civil unrest and terrorism. A pandemic spread of contagious diseases – sparked by climate change – is a very real "*black swan*" possibility. I think you get the idea.

WTS: You've covered a lot of ground. What main thoughts would you like us to leave with?

Conley: There are three interrelated themes to remember: The first, of a geopolitical nature, is the importance of having secure and stable conditions with which a nation can provide for the basic needs of its people. An inability to meet these needs will lead to political and social unrest, economic disruptions, a loss of markets, degradation of social institutions, and ultimately to civil disorders, mass migrations, or even overly-aggressive foreign policies to distract public attention from domestic failures; all breeding grounds for unrest and terrorism.

The second theme is the destabilizing role that climate change plays in making bad situations worse. The continuum of climate change threats I've outlined run the gamut from the direct effects of climate change in the Arctic regions to the more indirect effects of climate change as "*threat multipliers*" elsewhere. Examples include rising sea levels; destructive and costly weather patterns; floods, droughts, famines, degradation of oceans, waters, and crop production as well as pollution, and ecological destruction on a large scale.

The last theme deals with future competition for scarcer resources. In this struggle, nations will

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turn increasingly to the oceans for seabed minerals, fossil fuels, fisheries, and other opportunities. The rules of the road – UNCLOS and the EEZs – are far from clear, and the climate-induced events taking place in the Arctic region, referred to here as the “*Polar Plunge*,” will bring those rules to the forefront.

At present, there are disconnects between the White House and its military and intelligence agencies as to the threats posed by climate change. The latter believe that climate change will trigger new flashpoints and aggravate other areas such as maritime norms and jurisdiction over territorial waters. Our absence from the Paris Accord and UNCLOS does not help the global picture, and now is not the time to go AWOL.

WTS: You’ve painted a disturbing picture of the geopolitical impacts of climate change. Why aren’t we doing more about it?

Conley: There are many reasons and none of them make sense to me. As you know, I write and talk a lot about our tendency to over-fixate on immediate problems while ignoring the longer-term existential threats that can really clobber us – like climate change. Time is running out. We are nearing a number of irreversible “tipping points,” and it will take an all-out effort to blunt these trajectories; a war we seem to be losing. (See: “*Myopic Malpractice*”).

With the nations of the world now in the throes of a new arms race to protect their respective national interests, one can only wonder why some of that effort isn’t redirected toward climate change – perhaps the greatest of all threats to geopolitical stability.

Maybe that’s the answer: Let’s reframe climate change as the national security and economic issue that it truly is, and pursue it with the same intensity used to complete the Manhattan Project, win WWII, and beat the Soviet Union to the moon. Time is running out; what will it be?

Mike Conley

For more information, please visit our website at www.WeatheringtheStorm.net